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ABSTRACT

One aspect of the Alverno College (Wisconsin) teacher education program focuses on the critical treatment (critical revisioning) of popular approaches to teaching across lines of race, class, gender, culture, and power. To illustrate the development of prospective students' ability to think critically about such teaching, this discussion explores the revisioning of learning styles and cognitive styles, with a focus upon the potential for miscommunications in learning interactions, rather than the ascription of cognitive characteristics to individuals or to groups of minority students. The paper examines four assertions in critical revisioning as they apply to the constructs of cognitive style and learning style: (1) styles are reified constructs best understood as patterned dynamics of interaction with parents, teachers, and learning situations, not as static characteristics ascribable to learners themselves; (2) the application of styles research must be grounded in a critical understanding of authenticated principles of human learning and development as well as of the school culture; (3) practitioners must draw upon specific decontextualized knowledge about culturally and ethnically linked styles and relate this knowledge to the practitioner's evolving understanding; and (4) the legitimate application of style constructs is particularly concerned with the creation of conditions that maximize communication between teachers and students across all lines drawn by poverty, racism, powerlessness, and underpreparedness. (SM)

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**Making Uncommon Sense: Critical Revisioning Professional Knowledge
about Diverse Cultural Perspectives in Teacher Education**

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There has never been a time in the life of the American public school when we have not known all we needed in order to teach all those whom we chose to teach.

-- Ron Edmonds

An important theme in the most recent wave of educational reform has been the definition and articulation of a professional knowledge base for teachers. For example, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, created in 1987 at the urging of the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, has been designing certification standards for teaching practice. These standards of professional knowledge are to be used to credential teachers nation-wide in the same manner as physicians, accountants, and other professionals. "Teacher knowledge" has become the "foundation of the new reform" (Shulman, 1987) as the national push for school reform focuses upon the professional preparation of teachers and what they are expected to know.

The crux of teacher-education-as-reform is to distill the knowledges from practical teaching contexts ("the wisdom of practice") and incorporate them into theory-based and research-based teacher education curriculums. The unifying theme in research supporting this reform is a convergence upon the goal of codifying the knowledges, skills, sensibilities and dispositions that account for accomplished practice in the profession of teaching--spelling out the knowledge that the prototypical "good teacher" possesses.

But a critical omission in these efforts concerns teacher preparation for diversity. Specifically, how will the professional knowledge associated with effective teaching among diverse populations be included? Ethnic minority groups now comprise over 50% of K-12 public school enrollments in seven states, and 22 of the 25 largest city school districts are already predominantly non-white. Moreover, as the proportion of poor and minority students approaches 40% nation-wide, the number of minority teachers is expected to diminish to 5% this year.

In light of these sobering statistics it is reasonable to expect that the articulation of national standards for professional teacher knowledge incorporate the expertise necessary to teach effectively in multicultural, multiethnic and lower-income schools. But it appears that the expertise needed to be successful in these settings has not yet been set forth either in a professional knowledge base or in teacher preparation curriculum (Foster, 1989; Hollins, 1990; King and Ladson-Billings, 1989; T. Meier, 1989; T. Meier and Nelson-Barber, 1989; Trent, 1990). The vision of "the good teacher" emblematic in the corpus of professional teacher knowledge as defined by the National Board and university research does not articulate the craft knowledges associated with teaching effectiveness with children of color (Foster, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1989).

The craft knowledges associated with teaching effectiveness with children of color and of different cultures are drawn from authentic experiences within contexts that people of color live, learn, and struggle. For some years now ethnographic research has been documenting the ways in which the negative school experiences of poor and minority students can be circumvented by

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teachers who know how to communicate effortlessly across the lines of unequal power (Delpit, 1988) drawn by poverty, racism, and differences in cultural expression. The stumbling block is in transforming this expert teaching knowledge from the real practice of others into something "teachable" to prospective teachers. How can the perspectives and the moment-to-moment sensibilities of an expert teacher among poor and minority students be codified into teachable professional knowledge for prospective students?

If one accepts Ron Edmond's premise that the basic knowledges for effective teaching among poor and minority students have always been available, then the remedy does not rest in endeavors to create new knowledge--such as more research on cross-cultural differences. Instead, it may be that such professional and pragmatic knowledge about effective teaching in diverse settings needs to be made more available to potential teachers and more explicit in a professional knowledge base.

There are two key questions that have guided our approach at Alverno. First, how do we encourage pre-service teachers to think reflectively and critically about their own preparedness to teach in diverse settings in the context of the professional knowledge base on cultural and social diversity? Second, how do we encourage the active integration of the concomitant skills and abilities of this knowledge base in order that prospective teachers develop the life-long abilities for interacting effectively in diverse and unfamiliar contexts?

The purpose of this essay is to describe one aspect of our program regarding the critical treatment of popular approaches to teaching across lines of race, class, gender, culture and power. This critical treatment we have called critical revisioning, one of the integrated abilities successful prospective teachers develop to rearticulate expert professional knowledge in the light of experience. The critical revisioning is one of the integrative competencies--the last of five competences prospective teachers must demonstrate enroute to successfully completing the program. It is the demonstrated ability of critical thinking that we encourage our teacher preparation students to engage in as they specifically prepare themselves to work in culturally and ethnically diverse settings.

To better illustrate the development of this ability, this discussion will focus upon just one strand of professional knowledge about diverse populations--pedagogical knowledge and the application of learning styles and cognitive styles--as an illustrative example of critical revisioning. I chose cognitive styles and learning styles as the arena to exhibit critical revisioning because it is a domain of information in education and educational psychology where many pre-service teachers first encounter the combination of two important knowledge domains: the principles of human learning with differences.

Revisioning Learning Styles and Cognitive Styles

Our approach is based upon the assumption that the professional teacher knowledge needed to gain access to the lives, histories, cultures and experiences of diverse students is not generic knowledge that can be prescribed in a set curriculum. Rather, such knowledge must emerge through action--first through interactions and conversations in situations calling for professional judgments and dispositions about both knowledge and action, and then through critical reflection upon outcomes.

Revisioning is introduced to teacher preparation students as a way of critically thinking about, and within, the domain of multicultural education. This process begins with an introduction to ethnographic research literature which has revealed ways in which the schooling experiences of ethnic minority and poor children are "incongruent" with their cultural interests and home

experiences. Our pre-service teachers work with case examples of how the degree of "fit" between teachers' beliefs and expectations on one hand, and the cultural capital students bring to the classroom on the other hand, can create for these children a dissatisfaction and alienation that limits their success in school.

Our pre-service teachers, through case study analyses, examine some of the ways that ethnic group membership determines many cultural themes which contribute to "incongruence" between minority youngsters' "in-the-world" experience and their schooling experience. African American, Native American, Mexican American, Asian American and Puerto Rican youngsters are exposed to parental priorities and values which often differ in important ways from those experienced by white youngsters--and these ways of being have consequences for how they fare in school.

Revisioning cognitive style and learning style requires that our primary focus be the potential miscommunications that occur in learning interactions, rather than the ascription of cognitive characteristics to individuals or groups of minority students. The remainder of this paper will lay out the following four assertions which constitute the themes of critical revisioning as they would apply to the constructs of cognitive style and learning style:

1. Styles are reified constructs that are most appropriately understood as patterned dynamics-of-interaction with parents, teachers, and learning situations, and not as static characteristics ascribable to learners themselves. Characteristics of learners need to be understood in the context of learning actions and interactions.
2. For styles research to be appropriately applied to teaching children of color and poor children, the application must be grounded in an understanding of authenticated principles of human learning and development for those children as well as a critical understanding of "the school culture."
3. For styles research to be appropriately applied to teaching children of color and poor children, the practitioner must be able to draw upon specific decontextualized knowledge about culturally- and ethnically-linked styles, as it realistically relates to the practitioner's evolving understanding of the individual learner's perspective in the immediate situational context of learning.
4. The legitimate application of the "style" constructs has much less to do with the technology of re-aligning teaching styles than it does with the creation of the conditions which maximize communication between teachers and students across lines drawn by poverty, racism, powerlessness, and underpreparedness.

1. Styles are reified constructs that are most appropriately understood as patterned dynamics-of-interaction with parents, teachers, and learning situations, and not as static characteristics ascribable to learners themselves. Characteristics of learners need to be understood in the context of learning actions and interactions.

Cognitive style is a theoretical construct which refers to a specific preferred mode of processing information and responding to environmental stimuli. The mode is usually identified as a dichotomy. For example, the classic instance of cognitive style is field dependence versus field independence. People who are field-dependant in their processing mode tend to perceive a pattern as a whole and have difficulty focusing on one aspect of a situation, picking out details, or

analyzing a pattern in terms of its component parts. Alternatively, people who are field-independent are more likely to perceive separate parts of the entire pattern or stimulus array and to analyze and subsequently deconstruct the pattern into component parts.

Although most careful expositions of cognitive styles do not represent them as traits or stable characteristics, the literature on teaching applications frequently do. Pre-service teachers become aware of the reification of the construct by examining contradictions from the literature. Beginning with findings which ascribe a style to an entire minority ethnic group as in, for example, the proposition "Mexican Americans tend to be field-dependent," they uncover contradictory conclusions from that literature. Our pre-service teachers are asked "What do we make of this construct of field-dependency when the sample of Mexican-Americans are field-dependent in one kind of test (visual processing on the rod-and frame test), but field-independent when assessed in another (body orientation)?"

Out of this conversation comes an understanding that cognitive style, learning style, and cultural style are best thought of as a layered continuum moving from cognitive style (which is the individual's dispositions in thinking, perceiving and processing information), to learning style (which is how those dispositions manifest in learning activity), to cultural style (which is the manifestation of learning styles as culturally induced patterns of style in particular socio-cultural contexts). Most important in this discussion of styles is the understanding that preferred modes of information processing are socialized--shaped by the specific interactional learning situations constrained by an individual's culture.

Pre-service teachers working through case studies come to see that the constructs of style associated with children of color frequently are little more than artifacts of the struggle to acquire the school-based ways of learning. They examine qualitative research showing that a child's modes of perception, memorization, thinking, knowledge assembly and knowledge use is bound to, and shaped by, the patterns of activity, communication, and social relations in the culture of which he or she is a member. But there is a problem in applying style differences to teaching practice without a foundation of knowledge about the lives, experiences and cultures of children from cultural and linguistic communities different from your own. A dichotomous "force fit" into characteristics takes place when we assume members of a given group have particular characteristics.

When we get to the place where we assign characteristics to groups, saying Black kids are tactile-kinetic learners and white kids are abstract analytical learners, then we're engaging in the worst sort of stereotyping and all that that means for failing to provide equal access to educational opportunity. It can be even more insidious under the guise of "science." What we should not lose sight of is that the variation within culture group is often greater than the variation between groups. Moreover, statements like "the characteristics of the Mexican American learner" do not refer to culture, but to ethnicity, which is very different.

2. For styles research to be appropriately applied to teaching children of color and poor children, the application must be grounded in an understanding of authenticated principles of human learning and development of "the school culture."

The second theme of the critical revisioning approach to cognitive and learning styles is that for styles research to be appropriately applied to teaching children of color and poor children, the application must be grounded in a complete understanding of universal principles of human

learning and development for those children as well as getting inside the perspective of the individual learner. In the context of learning about learning style, this means that rather than focusing on presumed modes of processing for a given group, we need to understand how cultural style might inform our success with individuals. From this perspective, culture resides in the individual rather than the group.

The characteristic ways in which poor and ethnic minority children negotiate learning interactions differently than their middle-class white peers are not adequately explained by differences in cognitive style. It is not that there are no culturally-constrained modes of interpreting experience in learning situations, but rather that the emergent learning patterns are the result of strategic adjustments the youngsters make in trying to make sense in a social context that may not be congruent with their experience.

Pre-service teachers are given the opportunity to look critically at how they combine their understanding of human abilities with what they know about how culture is implicated in the socialization of certain skills and abilities. This requires a revisitation of work done on cognitive, emotional and social development in children, and a reformulation of the human abilities we need to regard as instructional goals. We as teachers want to encourage the much broader range of skills and abilities emblematic in non mainstream cultural settings which enable one to function most effectively in a complex, pluralistic society--e.g., the ability to work collectively, to adjust to change, to function effectively in a variety of social and cultural contexts, to understand the perspectives of others, and to solve problems in a real-life context.

Our pre-service teachers work with the assertion that the observed differences in performance are not merely the result of a static, internally organized mental set as suggested by some cognitive styles literature. Rather, they are based upon the different experiences that one group of children has when the styles they bring to the classroom interact negatively with the communicative styles of the teacher and the other children. Our pre-service teachers first work with the idea of styles being embedded in the dynamics of the interactional contact students make with teachers, classmates and classrooms.

According to Geneva Gay the cognitive style of low income, urban Black children often tends to be field-dependent, which in turn fosters a relational (non-analytic) learning style. This means that they tend to function better in cooperative, informal and loosely structured environments in which learning between teacher and students is collaborative. They tend to work together for the benefit of the group and the pace of the learning is determined by the momentum of the group's activity. But they are at a disadvantage in a schooling context in which the cognitive style of middle-class and non minority students tends to be field-independent, in turn inducing an analytical learning style among them. Learning is expected to occur in a formal, structured environment, paced by time demands fixed by the teacher. Achievement is centered more around what the individual does, not the group.

Out of this conversation our future teachers begin to question the tack of conforming pedagogy to allegedly different ways of thinking, based on the realization that the children's styles are not nearly as important as the interactional dynamics in the classroom. By working through case examples, our future teachers come to see that the thinking of the African-American youngsters might appear to be different, but that the perceived differences occur out of an interactional dynamic of how a meaning is negotiated. Meaning is a social construction. African-American children who bring a "non-standard" mode of interacting with the teacher and the classroom culture may generate different experiences and different meanings.

Our pre-service teachers begin to see that the different, often negative experiences of the "culturally different" are not so much a matter of learning style as they are a matter of communicative style and the subsequent mismatch of the understanding coming out of each teaching encounter as result of an incongruent, less-than-smooth interaction. Cultural differences in learning and cognition should not be located inside the minority learner. Rather, these differences are situated in social dynamic including not only the learner and the teacher, but also the sort of transaction that takes place, and other specifics of the situation. Without an understanding of social interactions, nothing valid can be said about how participants react to and make sense of the content, expectations and performance demands of classroom learning situations.

3. For styles research to be appropriately applied to teaching children of color and poor children, the practitioner must be able to draw upon specific decontextualized knowledge about culturally- and ethnically-linked styles, as it realistically relates to the practitioner's evolving understanding of the individual learner's perspective in the immediate situational context of learning.

Our pre-service teachers closely examine the notion of cultural incongruence as an explanation for the unsuccessful learning experiences of children of color and poor children. Through a critical analysis of all the features of a schooling environment which engender positive change, our prospective teachers begin to focus upon the skills and abilities they need to develop to be agents of access for students of non-mainstream communities. For example, from James Comer's work in New Haven, prospective teachers learn that part of their role as teachers will be to help children develop social skills. They, therefore, more naturally regard the expertise needed to shape social interaction skills as something integral to the total development of the child, and are less likely to regard social training as something additional or special they do for "disadvantaged" youngsters.

Similarly, from our analysis of the Kamehameha Early Education Project KEEP in Hawaii, our prospective teachers begin to envision their expertise in terms of recognizing and identifying relevant cultural features that can be capitalized upon in the shaping of "culturally appropriate" learning environments. The disposition that our pre-service teachers begin to express is that the problem of reducing the cultural incongruence between school culture and the home cultures of children of color has much less to do with ensuring a match between the children's cognitive learning styles and teaching styles than it does ensuring accurate communication and genuine inquiry in the context of culturally sensitive, multiculturally appropriate, non-racist pedagogy and curriculum.

Prospective teachers notice that, despite the frequency with which the KEEP project is heralded in the professional literature as an example of successful "matching of cultures," the project is, in fact, a better example of the integration of universally sound teaching and learning practices. They note the following practices that engender school success despite cultural features:

1. active, direct teaching of reading comprehension
2. peer group/cooperative learning
3. frequent assessment of student progress
4. appropriate balance of teaching approaches

5. positive classroom management strategies and well-organized, well-run classrooms
6. teacher consultants who model, coach, give feedback and assistance
7. collaboration of teachers and school-people with the others responsible for the children's learning

4. The appropriate goal for applying "style" constructs is to create conditions which maximize communication between teachers and students across lines drawn by poverty, racism, powerlessness, and unpreparedness.

The fourth assertion of our critical revisioning proposes that the appropriate goal for applying "style" constructs is to recreate and revision in schools a new common culture--a school context in which instructors and students authentically communicate in a common discourse and from which teachers realize the trajectory of academic development and achievement for their students. Pre-service teachers are provided the opportunity to develop a disposition towards Theresa Perry's conception of a "new common culture" (T. Perry, 1989) and the necessity of teachers becoming the vanguard of transformation of schools. The creation of a new common culture involves "reshaping the conversational terrain" so that participants can construct meaning accurately and authentically despite differences in perspective related to degree of participation in the culture of power.

In working with the idea of "the new common culture," our prospective teachers begin to re-evaluate their professional roles as teachers. They begin to think critically about what it will mean for them to become one of the "lynchpins" in the transformation of schools into learning communities in which all can participate. Most significant in this fourth strand are the changes in epistemology that prospective teachers begin to reflect, particularly the view that professional knowledge must continuously evolve, based upon actual experiences with the populations of students they will serve.

The essence of how to teach with consideration to learning styles has much less to do with accommodating people's learning modes than it does with teachers designing and creating curriculum and assessment based upon a careful (a critical) consideration of what the students need to know (in the world).

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